

# The World, the Web, and the Smithsonian



Once I would have said that a task as ambitious as creating a vast, useful and consistent Smithsonian presence on the Internet was inherently impossible. This has nothing to do with the complexity of, and consistent Smithsonian presence on the Internet was inherently impossible. This has nothing to do with the complexity of available technology. Indeed, online technology has progressed to the point that it can be said any organization can master it. The problem faced by the Smithsonian is organizational **complexity**, organizational **culture**, and organizational **will**.

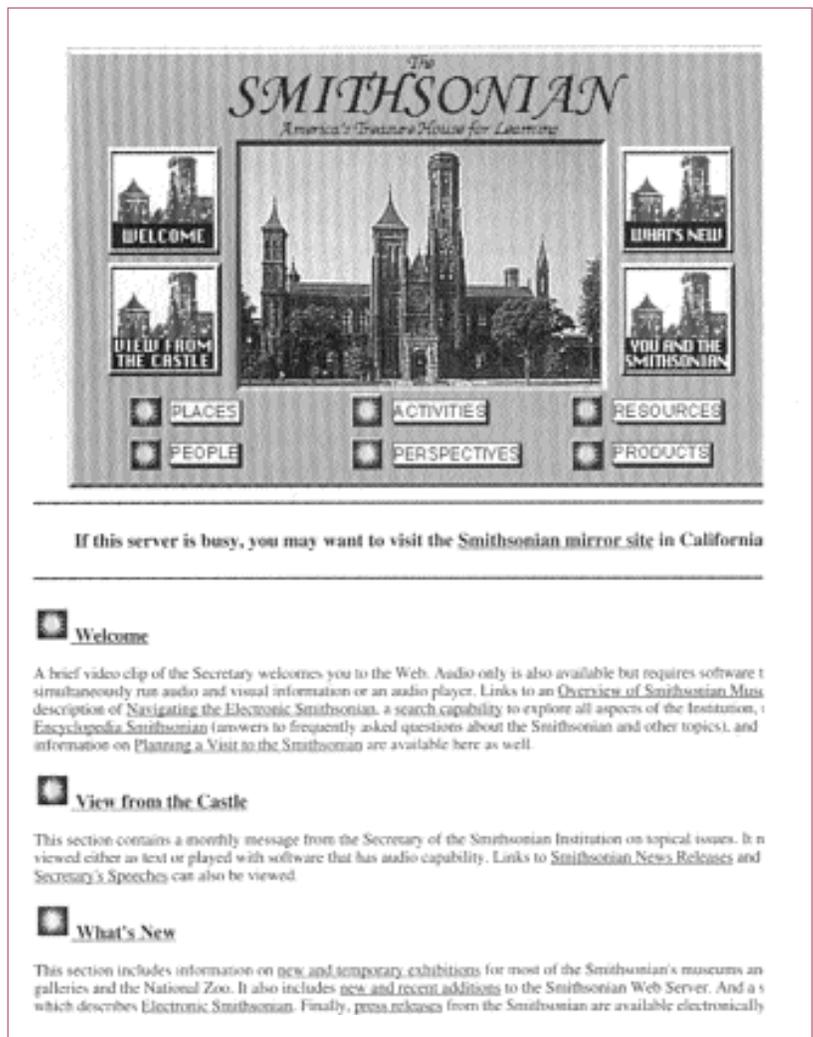
The Smithsonian, seen from the outside, appears to be a tightly coordinated institution. In fact, it is constructed from such an amazing variety of resource bases (having both public and private funding derived from many different sources), origins (each museum and research center emerged out of different historical circumstances and governance structures), and intellectual focuses (it harbors myriad disciplines and tasks within the larger groupings of science, history, and art) that any effort to create a unified strategy of presentation is, to say the least, bound to be an adventure.

Why did the effort work in this case? First of all, it must be said that electronic projects of any kind evoke a necessary and refreshing humility from most participants in the planning process. Very few people in our line of work bring long histories, recognized exper-

tise, or embedded assumptions to discussions about online presentations.

There may be doubts among some about the usefulness of such efforts—we are still in the age of faith, not certainty about the potential use of new enormous visual databases flashed around the world in an instant—but there is also remarkably little smugness about the right and the wrong way to proceed. This leads to a refreshing openness among participants, genuine discussions about needs and solutions to needs, and even a certain communal spirit which comes of all being in it together.

*The central Smithsonian's World WideWeb home page represents the Institution's first guess as to the routes of information sought by potential users of the 20-hour-long site.*



*The Smithsonian's first comprehensive experiment in the development of an information-rich and user-friendly home page was conducted by its National Museum of American Art in a two-year relationship with a commercial online service.*

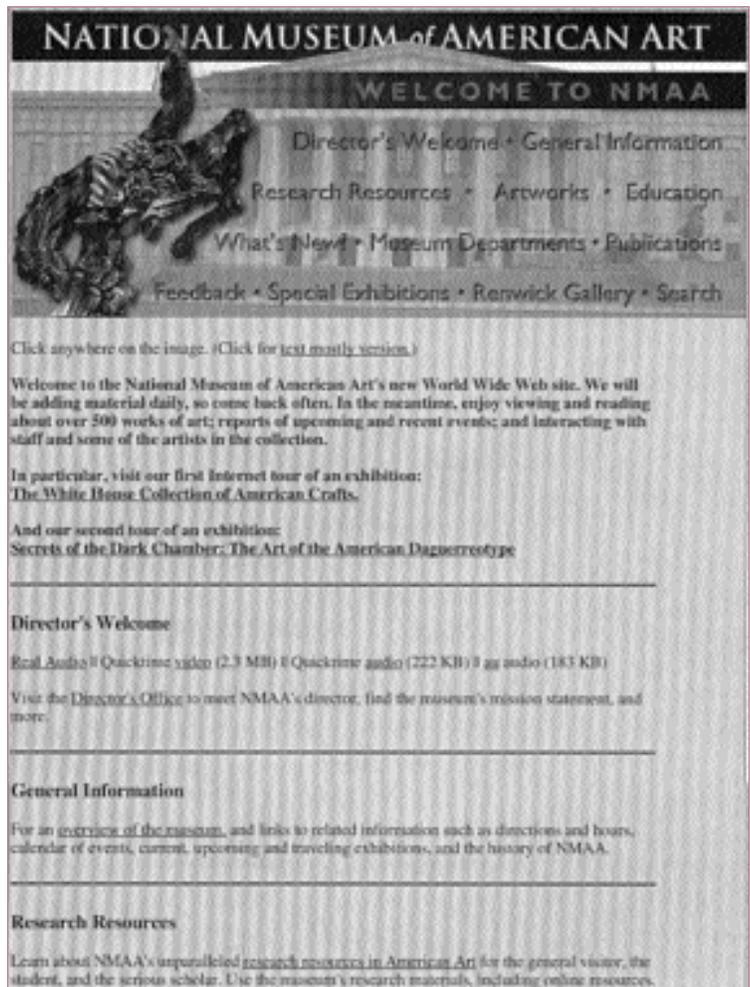
In the Smithsonian's case at least, humility came into play even in central administrative planning. There was, blessedly, no rigid master plan from on-high which began the process of our online conversion. From the first, it was recognized that we had to tap into the energy and intuition of those staff around the Institution who had long been testing the possibilities of the Net and other electronic options.

A full year before January 1995, when we began our determined effort to create an all-Smithsonian Website, we had invited anyone in the Smithsonian community who had an electronic project to a staff-only multi-media fair. This was facilitated by the resourceful director of our Information Age exhibition at the National Museum of American History. The effect was electric (no pun intended).

We also benefited from a few years of testing online possibilities with such commercial services as America Online (AOL) and CompuServe. The AOL connection was particularly useful as a galvanizing force because, although coordination was centered in a pan-Institutional office, experience was monitored by a users' group from throughout the Institution. The high morale within the group, which owed much to the sensitive coordination of our Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, led to a voluntary decision to return whatever profits came to individual units from AOL participation into a common pool to improve online strategies.

In all organizations there are pace-setters. In ours, there were a number who, to paraphrase a country song, "were online before online was cool." Chief honors go to the National Museum of American Art, whose director saw the possibilities of building new audiences and therefore directed museum energies and resources to understanding the programmatic uses of the medium.

It wasn't enough to get technical knowledge; the curators had to be involved from the first. On the science side, the curator of a major exhibition, Ocean Planet, decided to develop a parallel online exhibition, which would test the differences between the presentation of information in physical space and cyberspace. In this she was aided by a dedicated NASA volunteer. Fundamental to both



pioneering strategies was the recognition that this was the first medium whose presentations were continually affected by the interaction of the audience.

To bring these vital and disparate experiments together to create the dense Smithsonian Website launched in May 1995, took a number of happy circumstances. The first was the arrival of the 10th Smithsonian Secretary, I. Michael Heyman, who, when installed in September 1994, announced his commitment to the electronic transformation of the Institution. To underscore his commitment, he appointed a Counselor for Electronic Communications, whose 20-year background in the Institution was programmatic, not technical, and asked him to work directly with the newly arrived Senior Information Officer, the first in the Smithsonian's history.

Within months the decision to create a pan-Institutional Website was made. How fast this could be achieved depended in part on how quickly the Secretary's mandate permeated the institutional culture; but the toughest issue was finding a lead figure to guide the process of constructing both a central home page and home pages for the many museums, centers, and offices,

